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The
Esthetic Nature of
Tennyson
by
Jean Pauline Smith

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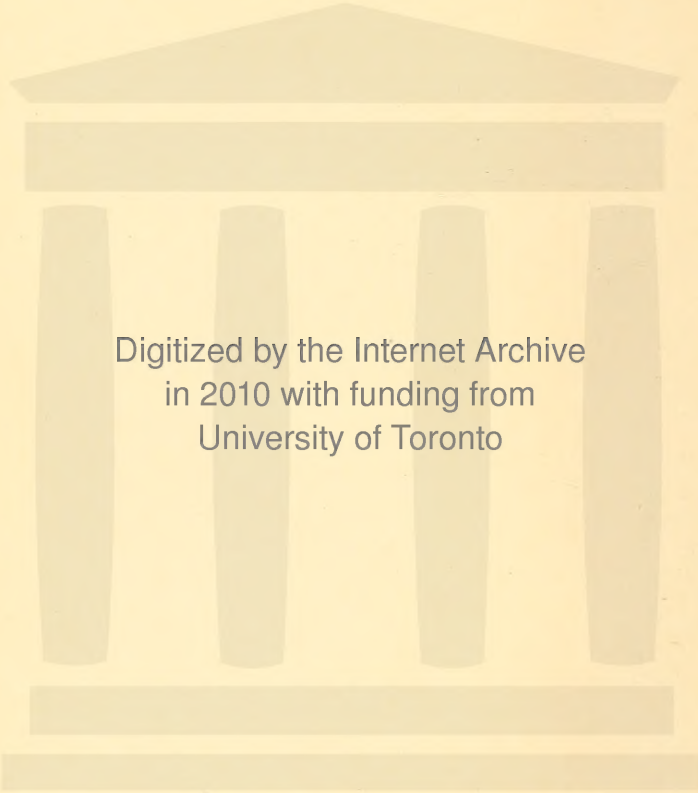


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THE AESTHETIC NATURE OF
TENNYSON



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The Aesthetic Nature of Tennyson

by

JEAN PAULINE SMITH, A.B., A.M.

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TO LOVERS AND READERS OF TENNYSON
I DEDICATE THIS LITTLE BOOK

“No nightingale delighteth to prolong
Her low preamble all alone
More than my soul to hear her echo'd song
Throb through the ribbed stone;

Singing and murmuring in her feastful mirth,
Joyful to feel herself alive,
Lord over Nature, Lord of the visible earth,
Lord of the senses five” . . .

Palace of Art.

THE AESTHETIC NATURE OF TENNYSON

In this study it is my purpose to show to what extent the different sense-impressions have appealed to Tennyson in his writing. The spirituality of the Universe is realized through the more intellectual senses of hearing and seeing. By means of these and by touch, which brings us in direct contact with the physical world, and because of our observations we are lifted to a higher plane and to a broader understanding of Nature and Man. By these we are able to communicate with others and with Nature. Whitman has said that "all objective grandeurs of the world, for highest purposes, yield themselves up, and depend on mentality alone."

The influence of the world on every individual is through his senses—mainly through touch, sight, and sound—especially after one has passed the infant stage. We are thus able to relate each day's experience to life as a whole. It is through the poetry of a man that we are able to experience, in our minds, his feelings and moods as he wrote, to see with him the scenes and figures which his imagination or experience enabled him

to paint in the medium chosen by him—namely, language. One thinks instantly of “The Vision of Sin,” which is one of the most striking examples of this phase of Tennyson’s work.

Some psychologists—as Bosanquet, for instance, in his “Three Lectures on the Aesthetic”—have referred to hearing and seeing as the “aesthetic senses,” while they consider touch, taste, and smell as unaesthetic. Bosanquet does acknowledge, however, that some of the aesthetic may be found in all pleasant feeling.^a According to these assertions—any feeling, from that pleasure gained when one is hungry to the feeling of the wind or sea-breeze, may be considered aesthetic, as they are. They say also that it would not necessarily be the pleasantest scent which would produce an “aesthetic attitude,” but that which gave the most interesting association—and that this association or value would be false, because the beauty—as of sea or marsh—would not be thought of in connection with the nature of the scent. This, I think, is false, because odors, especially of nature, invariably bring memories connected with the scent. Take for example Sidney Lanier’s “Marshes of Glynn.” These same writers—

^aBosanquet—Three Lectures on Aesthetic—pp. 10-11.

Bosanquet I quote as an instance^a—also state that touch, the last of these so-called unaesthetic senses, is regarded only as it gives an idea of the nature of a surface—its shape, roughness, or smoothness. This is true in one respect, but touch of that kind is as with the fingers. Touch, as of the wind or rain, seems to play as important a part in the aesthetic nature of man and in his enjoyment of the outdoor world, as does touch with the fingers. And again, we have the cases of blind people, who, though exceptions to the general rule, are able to feel through touch the aesthetic beauty and value where others with all their senses do not.

In Tennyson's poetry one sees also that the sense of smell has its aesthetic value—if one may call it such—while hearing and seeing are regarded as both aesthetic and intellectual. We realize with the poet that the more one observes, the more one is alert to what transpires in the world about him, the more does he appreciate the value of impressions gained through the senses—especially those of so-called aesthetic value.

As Horne has written of Tennyson, "he is no less able to 'pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone,' for certainly his works are equally char-

^aBosanquet—Three Lectures on Aesthetic—pp. 10-11.

acterized by thin thought, grace, depth of sentiment, and ideal beauty. And he not only has the most musical words at his command . . . but he possesses the power of conveying a sense of colour, and a precision of outline by means of words, to an extraordinary degree. In music and colour he was equalled by Shelley; but in form, clearly defined, with no apparent effort, and no harsh shades or lines, Tennyson stands unrivalled."

We shall find in this poet a broad creative imagination, but at the same time a wise control over it; a power of entering into the spirit of his ideal characters; a peculiar fusing of his vivid picturesque objects by means of a strong emotion; a variety of lyrical measures with a melodious harmony and modulation in tone with the rise and fall of feelings expressed; and last, lofty habits of thought, carrying a mellow soberness of tone.

THE UNAESTHETIC SENSES TOUCH AND TASTE

THE SENSE OF TOUCH.

Physical touch, as with the fingers, is rarely referred to directly by Tennyson, but in all the poems where Nature is an important factor, one feels the summer breeze, or balmy air from the sea. Like Wordsworth, Tennyson thought that

“Our bodies feel, where’er they be,
Against or with our will.”

The few direct allusions to touch may be cited. In “The Princess,” for example, are the lines :

. “a touch
Came round my wrist and tears upon my
hand”

In “Pelleas and Ettarre” is the phrase, “she, that felt the cold touch on her throat.” As the father, in the poem, “The Ring,” tells his story to his daughter, he makes but two references to the sense of touch;

. “while her lips
Were warm upon my cheek”

and

“I took and chafed the freezing hand.”

Again in "The Dawn" there is an allusion to the "habe in the red-hot palms of a Moloch of Tyre," while "In Memoriam" has the phrase, "thy brows are cold." In this strict sense of the word, touch is referred to only these few times. But in the broader sense, one is continually feeling with Tennyson the breeze from the "deep myrrh-thickets blowing round",¹ the breeze coming through the lattice, or the "amorous wind" which

"Breaths low between the sunset and the
moon."²

As we read "Aylmer's Field", we feel the "soft river-breeze" or the gale

"That blown about the foliage underneath,
.....
Beat balm upon our eyelids."³

We are refreshed by the "ambrosial air" which fans our brows and blows the fever from our cheeks,⁴ and by the rose-sweeten'd air of a

¹Recollections of Arabian Nights—v. 10.

²Eleanore—v. VIII.

³The Princess—III.

⁴In Memoriam—LXXXVI.

sultry summer evening. "The morning air, sweet after rain" blows coolness and moisture.

It is the sense of touch which first makes us conscious of our surroundings—whether physical touch or the touch of light-waves on our eyes, or the touch of a breeze, or of sound-waves. This seems to be the fundamental sense and from it come the others. The aesthetic value of it was appreciated by Tennyson, for some of his most effective work is in allusions to the effect gained through man's contact with some physical or natural force, such as the wind.

THE SENSE OF TASTE.

The second of these less intellectual senses, taste, is—in the number of allusions to it—almost negligible. The direct references to taste are found mainly in descriptions of banquets and feasts in such phrases as:

"Their nectar smack'd of hemlock on the lips,
Their rich ambrosia tasted aconite"^a

and there are only a few such allusions in all the poems of Tennyson, although he does, of course, often refer to drinking and feasting without tell-

^aDemeter and Persephone—v. 6.

ing us any thing about the satisfyingness of the taste, whatever it may be.

THE SENSE OF SMELL.

It is through this sense—smell—so-called “un-aesthetic”—that Tennyson is able to give his readers pleasure in the “Fragrant gloom of foreign churches”,^b “that reverendest smell on earth,” as Howells so admirably described it. As one travels through the country he is sensitive to the “Smell of new-mown hay”,^c to the “fragrant dew”,^d or the damp dank odor of the swamp, and the “sweet-smelling lanes”.^e With Tennyson we smell “the fragrant glistening deeps.” And as we read on in this poem, the freshness of nature is scented in the lines:

“All round about the fragrant marge

.

In order, eastern flowers large,

^bMaud—Part I—XIX: 5.

^cThe Owl—“When merry milk-maids click the latch.

And rarely smells the new-mown hay” . . .

^dOenone—v. 6.

^eThe Brook—v. 4.

^fRecollections of Arabian Nights—v. 2.

Some drooping low their crimson bells
Half-closed, and others studded wide
With disks and tiars, fed the time
With odour"^a

And again in the following lines we enjoy—
through the poet's imagination—the delightful
odors of an oriental garden :

"And deep myrrh-thickets blowing round
And stately cedars, tamarisks,
Thick rosaries of scented thorn,
Tall orient shrubs, and obelisks"^b

That all nature appealed to Tennyson we are
certain from such allusions as the sweet and
"frail perfume of the cuckoo-flower"^c or the
bees

"Through half-open lattices
Coming in the scented breeze
.
Who may minister to thee.
Summer herself should minister
To thee, with fruitage golden-rinded
On golden salvers, or it may be
Youngest autumn, in a bower.

^aRecollections of Arabian Nights—v. 6.

^bRecollections of Arabian Nights—v. 10.

^cMargaret—v. 1.

"Grape-thickened from the light, and blinded
With many a deep-hued bell-like flower
Of fragrant trailers, when the air
Sleepeth over all the heaven"^a

or to the "amorous, odorous wind" which
"Breathes low between the sunset and the
moon."^b

The poet writes—as he reminisces of his youth
—of

"The smell of violets, hidden in the green,
Pour'd back into my empty soul and frame
The times when I remember to have been
Joyful and free from blame"^c

In the city, on the other hand, there is the
more unpleasant, yet interesting and mysterious
commingling of odors. There is a poetic appeal
in this and Tennyson gives his impression in the
lines :

"The drowsy hours, dispensers of all good,
O'er the mute city stole with folded wings,
Distilling odors on me as they went
To greet their fairer sisters of the East."^d

^aEleanore—v. II-III.

^bEleanore—v. VIII.

^cDream of Fair Women—v. 20.

^dThe Gardener's Daughter.

There are also allusions to the rose-sweeten'd air in the "still sweet summer night," and to the flowing odor of the spacious air," or to the

 "morning air, sweet after rain"

which blew

 "Coolness and moisture and all the smells
 of bud
And foliage from the dark and dripping
 woods."

Aside from these and a few other allusions and references such as in the "Spinster's Sweet-Arts" to "the stink o' 'is pipe i' the 'ouse" and to "Owd Roa" who "smell'd like a herse a-singeing'" after rescuing Dick from the fire,—Tennyson makes comparatively few allusions to the sense of smell. As seen from the examples cited above, those which have the strongest appeal to him and which make the strongest impression on his readers are from Nature. The out-of-doors called him and he knew it in all its moods and caprices.

"Pelleas and Etarre.

'Lovers' Tale—Part I—v. 13.

'Lovers' Tale—Part III.

The sense of smell, though less frequent in occurrence than the senses of sight and sound, is strongly noticeable, nevertheless, throughout this poet's work. He, like Keats, was keen enough to appreciate the value of impressions thus gained, and with his artistic ability has been able to produce in his readers the same sensations which he enjoyed either when actually experiencing them or when he allowed his imagination free play. As one often recalls a visit to some historic city, in much the same way do we remember many of Tennyson's poems because of the strong appeal of such phrases as "a morning air, sweet after rain," or the "fragrant gloom of foreign churches."

Thus we may see from these illustrations that the appeal of the senses of touch and smell was stronger than that of taste—and that the appeal in almost every case was through Nature. We may judge, therefore, that Tennyson was a keen observer of the variety of sensations and odors of fragrance one finds if he is in the least interested in the out-door world and in the fairy-like charm of a wood fresh and sparkling from a recent shower, in the enchantment of a garden from which are wafted rose-sweeten'd breezes, or in the invigorating odor and feeling of a fresh sea-breeze. He too enjoyed the pungent aroma of the pines, or the peculiar smell of the

ocean as the surf rises and falls caressingly on the sandy beach or rages more vigorously on a rugged cliff.

THE SENSE OF SIGHT

Tennyson's youth in the country at Somersby and on the coast of Lincolnshire, where the long breakers fall and thunder "with a heavy clap and spread in a curdling blanket of seething foam over the level sands," and the observations which he made there gave him the wonderful power to portray Nature in all her whimsical moods and fancies. The lurid glow and blood-red glare of his sunsets are striking in their vivid colorful picturesqueness. All who knew the poet marvelled at his great love and knowledge of Nature; every bird, every flower, every animal was familiar to him, and his knowledge of the stars was equal to that of Milton or Dante.

"All' alta fantasia qui manco possa;
Ma gia volgeva il mio disiro e il velle,
Si come rota ch' egualmente é mossa,
l'Amor che mova il sole e l'altre stelle."

^a"To the high fantasy here power failed; but already my desire and will were rolled—even as a wheel that moveth equally—by the Love that moves the sun and other stars."—Dante—"Divina Commedia"—Paradiso-Canto XXXIII—lines 142-145.

While Keats, who was a city man, wove brilliant pictures merely from the suggestion of a "red rag," Tennyson had the experience of the country from which to draw, and his use of colors is a striking characteristic of his work. His fondness for the rich shades is found in such phrases as "rare embroidery of the purple clover",^b "crimson shells",^c or

. arras green and blue
Showing a gaudy summer morn"^d . . .

and such lines as he uses to describe Godiva's steed in its rich trappings of "purple blazon'd with armorial gold," or in "Day Dreams" where he writes of the "grapes with bunches red as blood." Again in "The Sleeping Beauty" there is a harmonious picture of richness and color in the passage:

"She lying on her couch alone
Across the purple coverlet,
The maiden's jet-black hair has grown,
On either side her tranced form

^bA Dirge—v. VI.

^cThe Mermaid—v. III.

^dPalace of Art—Sec. I.

"Forth streaming from a braid of pearl:
The slumbrous light is rich and warm,
And moves not on the rounded curl" . . .

One is continually noticing his artistic word pictures of "Laborious orient ivory" or "ambrosial aisles of lime",^a or his unique description of Lilia whom he calls a "rosebud set with wilful thorns". In "Tithonus" also we find some typically Tennysonian lines:

"A whitehair'd shadow roaming like a dream
The ever-silent places of the East,
Far-folded mists, and gleaming halls of
morn."

"The Princess" is one of the best examples of his profuse use of colors and picturesque portraits. This poem is a "mine of beautiful images, exquisite pictures".^b The descriptive passages are among the poet's best work. In a few gorgeous lines he brings before us the stately palace with its towers and turrets, its corridors and halls, its fountain-sprinkled lawns, its busy

^aThe Princess—Prologue.

^bA. C. Benson—"Alfred Tennyson."—p. 185.

court-yard, its bowery thickets.

More distinctly Tennysonian than any others, perhaps, are the pictorial poems such as "The Lady of Shalott", "Dream of Fair Women", and "The Palace of Art", which are really little galleries of pictures. For instance, in the first of this group, we have the description of the knight as he "Rode down to Camelot":

"All in blue unclouded weather
Thick-jewell'd shone the saddle leather,
The helmet and the helmet-feather
Burn'd like one burning flame together,
As he rode down to Camelot.
As often thro' the purple night,
Below the starry clusters bright,
Some bearded meteor, trailing light,
Moves over still Shalott."

The poet allowed his imagination to rule and he has described the pictures of his fancy. In the "Lady of Shalott" the artist gives such brilliant touches of color as the sun "dazzling thro' the leaves," "the shield that sparkled on the yellow field," and "the gemmy bridle that glitter'd free." But this joyous picture is in direct contrast to the following scene in which

. . . "down the river's broad expanse . . .
Thro' the noises of the night
She floated down to Camelot."

The subjectivity of Tennyson is noticeable in contrast to the objective character of Browning's poems. Browning generally describes places and people as they are, while Tennyson usually reveals pictures drawn from a fanciful imagination—a series of ideal story-book people whom he portrays, a series of scenes painted from memory. The subjects of Tennyson's poems are mentally drawn, and it is often the philosophizing of this poet, as to the effect of the world on man's life, which brings more clearly to his readers the aesthetic value of sight and its mental and emotional effect on man.—As with the "Lady of Shalott" only "shadows of the world appear." And again in "A Dream of Fair Women", the poet writes

"I turning saw, throned on a flowery rise,
One sitting on a crimson scarf unroll'd;
A queen, with swarthy cheeks and bold
black eyes,
Brow-bound with burning gold."

"The Palace of Art" is, in title, what the poem is in reality—throughout are exquisite pictures

such as the description of the palace in the evening glow :

“while day sank or mounted higher,
The light of aerial gallery, golden-rail’d,
Burnt like a fringe of fire.

Likewise the deep-set windows, stain’d and
traced,
Would seem slow-flaming crimson fires
From shadow’d grots of arches interlaced,
And tipt with frost-like spires.”

The “Recollections of Arabian Nights” is a poem expressive of the luxurious sense of a gorgeous inward picture-gallery, such as only a vivid imagination may conceive. In this one finds a brilliant scene of oriental splendor :

“Then stole I up, and trancedly
Gazed on the Persian girl alone,
Serene with ardent-lidded eyes
Amorous, and lashes like to rays
Of darkness, and a brow of pearl
Tressed with redolent ebony,
In many a dark delicious curl,
Flowing beneath her rose-hued zone;
The sweetest lady of the time,
Well worthy of the golden prime
Of good Haroun Alraschid.”—

Other striking examples of his use of color are such phrases as

. . . . "Scarlet-mingled woods
Glowed for a moment as we past."^a

or in the following description of Queen Guinevere:

"She seemed a part of joyous spring
A gown of grass-green silk she wore,
Buckled with green clasps before;
A light-green tuft of plumes she bore
Closed in a golden ring."^b

The "Idylls of the King" has numerous examples of Tennyson's extraordinary skill in sketching broad landscapes very briefly—

. . . "But Arthur with a hundred spears
Rode far, till o'er the illimitable reed,
And many a glancing splash and sallowy isle,
The wide-wing'd sunset of the misty marsh
Glared on a huge machicolated tower"

^aThe Voyage—v. XI.

^bSir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere—v. 3.

and also

“As the crest of some slow-arching wave
Heard in dead night along that table-shore,
Drops flat, and after the great waters break
Whitening for half a league, and thin them-
selves,

Far over sands marbled with moon and
cloud.”

It has been said that the “power which makes Tennyson’s Idylls so unique in their beauty is . . . his wonderful skill in creating a perfectly real and living scene,—such as always might, and perhaps somewhere does, exist in external Nature”^a . . .

Tennyson recorded briefly the sensations received, and interpreted them in the language of Nature. He noticed the minutest detail, wild-flowers, foliage, bird-calls, or the effect of wind and rain. But his gift for the imaginative understanding of beauty was pre-eminent. From his visits to the coast he gained impressions of the cliffs, long reaches of sandy shore, and towering crested green breakers; while the downs, lakes, babbling brooks, or grassy slopes all gave him settings for his legends and other

^aR. H. Hutton—Literary Essays.

poems. From his keen observation he was able to paint beautiful descriptions of the sunrise as "an awful rose of dawn,"^b or "the scarlet shafts of sunrise."^c

In "Enoch Arden" is the quaint picture of a small fishing village on the east coast of England full of picturesque scenes and gleams of color. The opening lines give the setting:

 "Long lines of cliff breaking have left a
 chasm;
And in the chasm are foam and yellow
 sands;
Beyond, red roofs above a narrow wharf
In clusters; than a moulder'd church; and
 higher
A long street climbs to one tall-tower'd
 mill,—
And high in heaven behind it a gray down
With Danish barrows"^c . . .

One can imagine here the fishing-smacks off shore riding calmly at anchor, sails flapping idly in the breeze; while on the beach near the wharf may be seen the nets spread out to dry—some

^bVision of Sin—Part III.

^cEnoch Arden—v. 41.

of them being over-hauled by grizzled sea-worn "old salts" who jovially tell "yarns" of their experiences.

His fondness for marine pictures is seen in such poems as "Sea Dreams", and he observed Nature "in a slow, tranquil, and ruminative manner, and had a remarkable faculty for seizing upon the salient feature of a scene."^a The following lines paint a picture familiar to many of us:

. "a full tide
. on the foremost rocks
Touching, upjetted in spirits of wild sea-
 smoke
. and fell
In vast cataracts"^b

^aA. C. Benson--Alfred Tennyson--p. 210.

^bSea Dreams--v. 2.

In a letter to a friend Dickens once wrote: "I have been reading Tennyson all this morning on the sea-shore. Among other trifling effects, the waters have dried up as they did of old, and shown me all the mermen and mermaids at the bottom of the ocean; together with millions of queer creatures, half fish and half fungus, loo'ing down into all manner of coral caves and seaweed conservatories; and staring in with their great dull eyes at every open nook and

In this same poem one may see the sails "rosed in the east" and a "long reef of gold," or "a fleet of jewels—Sailing along before a gloomy cloud."

His extraordinary powers of description have aided him in painting London in all the picturesque dismalness of an English rainy day:

"The noise of life begins again
And ghastly thro' the drizzling rain
On the bald street breaks the blank day."

loop-hole."

Tennyson's descriptive power shows the effect of pure suggestion on the imagination.

"Mr. Pelgrave tells us that it was understood that when he was traveling with Tennyson, if any scene of more than usual beauty met their eyes, he was to withdraw for a few minutes and allow the poet to contemplate it in silence and solitude."

"I hear," said Tennyson once, "that there are larger waves at Bude than at any other place. I must go thither and be alone with God."

It was his frequent and thoughtful communion with God which no doubt enabled the poet to leave such a poem as "Crossing the Bar" which is among his best works. And the lines,

"But such a tide as moving seems asleep
Too full for sound and foam" . . .

are of "eternal stamp."

In Memoriam—Part VII—v. 3.

Tennyson was "faithful through his whole life to beauty, writing always of what was worthy of love, of joy, of solemn or happy reverence The manifestation of these things, his creation of them, for the love and pleasure and veneration of himself and men, was his unbroken delight."^b One sees throughout his work, the poet's powerful imagination, his wonderful appreciation of color, his elaborate descriptions of courtly life, and his ability to paint brilliant or dim word pictures both of man and Nature.

The bard himself spoke of his "dim mystic sympathies with tree and hill reaching far back into childhood"^c . . . He has descriptions of the variety of streams in the island:

"A land of streams! some like a downward
smoke,
Slow-dropping veils of thinnest lawn"^d . . .

The power to see beauty and to shape it were his.

^bS. Brooks—Tennyson—His Art and Relation to Modern Life—p. 9.

^cA. C. Benson—Alfred Tennyson—p. 213.

^dLotus-Eaters.

Brooks says of the poet: "He wrote only that of which he loved to write, that which moved him to joy or reverence, that which he thought of good report for its loveliness . . . He saw all the universe of man and Nature and of God in their relation to ineffable beauty, and that the getting of this pervading essence out of all things, the shaping of it—was the one supreme thing in his art for which he cared."

His poems of pastoral scenes vibrate with the "caressing air of rural England." His power of expressing vivid thought in a "salient image" is illustrated by the anecdote which Reverend H. Fletcher told of him: During a walk with Mathew Arnold and Tennyson in the Lake country they came to the top of a hill overlooking a mountain-pasture where a flock of brown-faced sheep were grazing. Arnold made some far-fetched elaborate comparison. Tennyson answered, "No, it looks like nothing but a great blanket full of fleas." It was this quick wit and sense of humor which made the poet such a charming companion for those who knew him.

The rare power of giving atmosphere to a poem is forcibly felt in the famous lines describ-

"S. Brooks—Tennyson, His Art and Relation to Modern Life—pp. 11-13.

ing Enoch's sense of lonely isolation on a desert island :

“No sail from day to day, but every day
The sunrise broken into scarlet shafts
Among the palms and ferns and precipices :
The blaze upon the waters to the east ;
The blaze upon his island overhead ;
The blaze upon the waters to the west ;
Then the great stars that globed themselves
in Heaven.
The hollower-bellowing ocean, and again
The scarlet shafts of sunrise—but no sail.”

and again in “Mariana in The South” where the sleeper, after dreaming of cool breezes and running brooks, wakens to a consciousness of bare desolation—

“She woke: the babble of the stream
Fell, and, without, the steady glare
Shrank one sick willow sere and small.
The river-bed was dusty-white;
And all the furnace of the light
Struck up against the blinding wall.” . . .

This picture may recall familiar sensations to any who have been out in a desert country and have been forced to remain in the burning hot

sun for hours, when the heat from the sand seems to rise up in an effort to overcome one.

In "Mariana" we see how a few words can conjure up images of a lonely landscape—

"About a stone-cast from the wall
A sluice with blaken'd water slept,
And o'er it many, round and small,
The cluster'd marish-mosses crept.
Hard by a poplar shook alway,
All silver-green with gnarled bark:
For leagues no other tree did mark
The level waste, the rounding gray."

The utter desolation of this picture is impressive and one can easily imagine similar scenes in the devastated war-regions of Belgium and France. Could Tennyson have lived at this period, what pictures would his pen have left to posterity!

Of the poem, "Maud," one of the best known of his works, Jowett has written: "No poem since Shakespeare seems to show equal power of the same kind, or equal knowledge of human nature. No modern poem contains more lines that ring in the ears of men. I do not know any verse out of Shakespeare in which the ecstacy of love soars to such a height." Whether we fully agree with this or not, we all acknowledge the exquisite beauty of the lines:

"A million emeralds break from the ruby-
budded lime
In the little grove where I sit—ah, wherefore
cannot I be
Like things of the seasons gay, like the
bountiful season bland,
When the far-off sail is blown by the breeze
of a softer clime
Half-lost in the liquid azure bloom of a
crescent of sea,
The silent sapphire-spangled marriage ring
of the land?"

and the wonder of sunrise in the following:

"For a breeze of morning moves,
And the planet of Love is on high,
Beginning to faint in the light that she loves
On a bed of daffodil sky,
To faint in the light of the sun she loves
To faint in his light, and to die."

In his discussion of the poem, Lyall says that "some considerable mental agility is needed to fall in with the rapid changes of mood and motive which succeed each other within the compass of a piece that is too short for the delineation of character; ranging from melodramatic horror in the opening stanzas to passionate and joyous

melodies in the middle part, sinking into a dolorous wail, rising into frenzy, and closing with the trumpet note of war."

Tennyson never forgot that the work of a poet should be and is to convince the world of the power of God over all men and Nature, and of the love and beauty in the world—easily found if one seeks it. "What is always true of beauty is this," says Brooke,^a "that, wherever it appears, it awakens love of it which has no return on self, but which bears us out of ourselves; it stirs either joy or reverence in the heart—and it kindles the desire of reproducing it, not that we may exult in our own skill on forming it, but that our reproduction of it may awaken emotions in others similar to those which the original sight of beauty stirred in our own hearts—He whose eyes are steadily fixed on the beautiful, always loves, and is always young."

Of the early volume of his poems, the "Ode to Memory" is one of the most typical and has some exquisitely original descriptive passages, such as

. "the waterfall
Which ever sounds and shines

^aTennyson, *His Art and Relation to Modern Life*—pp. 8-10.

A pillar of white light upon the wall
Of purple cliffs, aloof desiered" . . .

and

"Long alleys falling down to twilight grotts.
Or opening upon level plots
Of crowded lilies, standing near
Purple-spiked lavender."

The simplicity of Tennyson and the equality of his work from the earlier through to the later poems is noticeable. He has retained the same fineness and the same close-knit characteristic throughout. His material was the same, but as he grew older the pictures, arrangement, invention, and coloring changed, and in his later work the brilliancy of his youth has been subdued and has taken on a more somber hue.

THE SENSE OF HEARING

The sensitiveness of the poet to the power of music of all kinds or to the many and varied sounds in Nature appeals strongly to readers of Tennyson. The call of the thrush, the booming of a beetle, the humming of the bee, or the babbling brook each has its charm for him. The cheerful barking of the collie, the cooing of wood-doves, the shrill hallooes of owlets, the murmur and mourn of water-gnats over the pools in the burn, or on the other hand the peal of the sweet church bells—and his appreciation of their beauty—were a great source of power to the writer. He loved to hear the “mill-dam rushing down with noise”^a and the deep brook groaning beneath the mill.

His keen perception of harmonies between matter and spirit was the deepest source of power to Tennyson. “The Vision of Sin,” for instance, is full of fanciful sounds and “voluptuous music” as expressed in such lines as :

. “a mellow sound,
Gathering up from all the lower ground;

^aMiller's Daughter—v. 7 and 15.

Narrowing in to where they sat assembled
Low voluptuous music winding trembled,
Wov'n in circles:

Then the music touched the gates and died;
Rose again from where it seem'd to fail,
Storm'd in orbs of song, a growing gale;
Till thronging in and in, to where they
waited,

As 'twere a hundred-throated nightingale,
The strong tempestuous treble throb'd and
palpitated;

Ran into its giddiest whirl of sound,
.

Till, kill'd with some luxurious agony
The nerve dissolving melody
Flutter'd headlong from the sky" . . .

The climax is reached in the lines:

"As 'twere a hundred-throated nightingale."

To any who have heard the great symphonies of Beethoven, Chopin, and the other masters, this galaxy of music might well fit in with the interpretations and scenes we imagine as we listen to the orchestral rendition of these master-pieces in harmony.

In the following passage^a in contrast to the above—we find the expression of delight of the impressionable boy in sounds of dawn—the morning song of the birds, a song expressive of the happiness of youth, and the anxious bleating of lambs :

“Pour round my ears the livelong bleat
Of the thick-fleeced sheep from wattled
folds,
Upon the ridged wolds,
When the first matin-song hath waken’d
loud
Over the dewy earth forlorn” . . .

Another picture of dawn is found in the lines :

“I heard no sound where I stood
But the rivulet on from the lawn
Running down to my own dark wood ;
Or the voice of the long sea-wave as it
swell’d
Now and then in the dim-gray dawn”.^b

This is in contrast to the lively freshness of the sound of “bugle breezes” blowing “reveillée to

^aOde to Memory—v. IV.

^bMaud.

the breaking morn."

And in the following apostrophe to morning we feel the mood of the writer :

"Risest thou thus, dim dawn, again,
And howlest, issuing out of night,
With blasts that blow the poplar white,
And lash with storm the streaming pane."^c

This expresses the great grief and keen loss which Tennyson experienced with the death of his friend, Hallam, these lines being written on the first anniversary of his death. The deep sorrow of the poet and his thoughts on the Unknown are felt in this poem perhaps more than in any other. His many moods are disclosed in such lines as

"And all the phantom, Nature, stands—
With all the music in her tone,
A hollow echo of my own,—
A hollow form with empty hands."—

This and similar passages are thoroughly atmospheric and suggestive in their imagery. Throughout the poems, natural sounds are found to be symbolic of moods—"Tears, Idle Tears"

^cIn Memoriam.

is one of the most familiar of these instances.

“Ah, sad and strange as in dark summer
dawns

The earliest pipe of half-awaken'd birds
To dying ears”

Each image is a “symbol charged with feeling.” Not only does it suggest the mood of the author at the time he wrote, but the song of the birds at dawn will always mean more to us after reading the lines. We gain new spiritual associations through Nature. Through Nature we realize a Higher Power Who is responsible for all the wonders which we hear and see—such as the “dead claps of thunder,” “the living roar” of the sea, or the light of the North around which

“A belt, it seem'd, of luminous vapor, lay,
And ever in it a low musical note
Swell'd up and died; and, as it swell'd a
ridge

Of breaker issued from the belt, and still
Grew with the growing note, and when the
note

Had reached a thunderous fulness, on those
cliffs

Broke, mixt with awful light (the same
as that

Living within the belt) whereby she saw
That all those lines of cliffs were cliffs no
more.—

.
. . . And then the great ridge drew,
Lessening to the lessening music, back,
And past into the belt and swell'd again
Slowly to music :"^a

Through this whole poem the impression of the
many sounds is strong—and there are such
striking lines as

. "but if there were
A music harmonizing our wild cries,
Sphere-music such as that you dream'd
about,
Why, that would make our passions far too
like
The discords dear to the musician. No—
One shriek of hate would jar all the hymns
of heaven :
True Devils with no ear, they howl in tune
With nothing but the Devil!"

The ghostlike atmosphere of "The Sisters" is
gained by means of such words as "howling,"

^aSea Dreams.

"roaring," "raging," "raving," which show the wierd power of the wind. And again in the familiar lines of "In Memoriam" do we feel the hollow reverberations

"Like echoes in sepulchral halls
As drop by drop the water falls
In vaults and catacombs"——

and the awful strength of the elements expressed in the passage which also discloses his own thoughts :

"Tonight the winds begin to rise
And roar from yonder drooping day ;
The last red leaf is whirl'd away,
The rooks are blown about the skies ;

The forest crack'd, the water curl'd,
The cattle huddled on the lea ;
And wildly dash'd on tower and tree
The sunbeam strikes along the world ;

.

I scarce could brook the strain and stir

.

That makes the barren branches loud,"—

Tennyson is said by some critics to be the

greatest word-painter among the English poets. His task has been accomplished in the lyrical sphere and his power lies in his artistic use of words by means of which he places before the imagination the most subtle movements of the reader's consciousness. In this he satisfies the law of art as defined by Aristotle: "Poetry has sprung from two causes, each of them a thing inherent in human nature. The first is the habit of imitation; for to imitate is instinctive with mankind; and man—learns at first by imitation. Secondly, all men take a natural pleasure in the products of imitation—a pleasure to which the facts of experience bear witness. . . . To imitate, then, is natural in us as men; just as our sense of musical harmony and our sense of rhythm are natural"^a—The lyric poet can "show the very age and body of the time his form and pressure," if he can not "hold the mirror up to Nature." He makes himself felt by touching the emotions and sentiments of society—and nowhere have these emotions and sentiments been better expressed in harmony, dignity, and repose, than in "In Memoriam." Aristotle's feeling that the motion of the spirit which impels the artist to put his own idea into his imitation of Nature

^aLane Cooper—Aristotle on the Art of Poetry—p. 10.

and which justifies the artistic imitation of what ought to be, is founded on the fact that all individuals are fundamentally alike and that it is the duty of the artist to know the imaginative expectations of men as such.

In all of the poems there is a metrical richness which is typically Tennysonian. Benson^a wrote of the poet that he was "fond of a certain kind of informal meter,—which he gradually deserted; his poems became more strict and regular as his artistic sense grew. . . . These experiments of Tennyson were suggested to him not by musical time, but by the irregular and natural beat of homely things, the ticking of clocks, the thud of oars in row-locks, the clang and clink of hammers, the rolling of wheels, the purring of cats, the thin song of kettles—all the world is full of rhythmical noises; and the dreaming ear of Tennyson seems to have been peculiarly sensitive to such things."

The story of *Maud* is told in a series of exquisite lyrics and in it the subtle influence of sound- and sight—is markedly noticeable. "All poetry," says Lyall, "may be said to make its primary appeal to the ear."^b Tennyson's use of various sounds is especially characteristic of

^aAlfred Tennyson—p. 159.

^bAlfred Tennyson—p. 93.

this poem in such lines as:

“Listening now to the tide in its broad-flung
shipwrecking roar,
Now to the scream of a madden’d beach
dragg’d down by the wave,”^a—

or his description of the maid as she sang, with
all the abandon of light happy freedom^b

“In the meadow under the Hall!
She is singing an air that is known to me,
A passionate ballad gallant and gay,
A martial song like a trumpet’s call!
Singing alone in the morning of life,
In the happy morning of life and of May,
Singing of men that in battle array,
Ready in heart and ready in hand,
March with banner and bugle and fife
To the death, for their native land.

Maud with her exquisite face,
And wild voice pealing up to the sunny sky,
And feet like sunny gems on an English
green,

^aMaud—Part I—Sec. III.

^bSection V.

Maud in the light of her youth and grace,
Singing of Death, and of Honour that cannot die."^a

or his description of the mysterious noises of a lonely empty house

. . . "half-hid in the gleaming wood,
Where I hear the dead at midday moan,
And the shrieking rush of the wainscot
mouse,
And my own sad name in corners cried,
Where the shiver of dancing leaves is
thrown
About its echoing chambers wide,"^b

The different moods of the poet and the atmosphere of lonesomeness one feels through all the poem and he gains his effects by his thoughtful expressive descriptions in passages similar to the following:

"Is that enchanted moan only the swell
Of the long waves that roll in yonder bay?
And hark the clock within the silver knell
Of twelve sweet hours"^c

^aSection V—v. 1 and 2.

^bSame—Section VI—v. 8.

^cSame—Sec. XVIII—v. VIII.

or again in the phrase, "noiseless music of the night," or in the hopelessness of the lines :

. . . "my heart is a handful of dust,
And the wheels go over my head,
And bones are shaken with pain,
For into a shallow grave they are thrust,
Only a yard beneath the street,
And the hoofs of the horses beat, beat,
The hoofs of the horses beat,
Beat into my scalp and my brain,
With never an end to the stream of passing
feet,
Driving, hurrying, marrying, burying.
Clamour and rumble, and ringing and clat-
ter,
And here beneath it is all as bad,
For I thought the dead had peace, but it is
not so ;
To have no peace in the grave, is that not
sad ?
But up and down and to and fro,
Ever about me the dead men go ;
And then to hear a dead man chatter
Is enough to drive one mad."

Tennyson possessed the power of giving reality and spirit to simple incidents and objects. The solitude of the moated grange is felt as with

Mariana we hear the blue fly as it sings "i' the pane" and the mouse that "behind the mouldered wainscot shrieked." And again we can imagine with the poet that

"Old footsteps trod the upper floors,
Old voices called her from without!"

and we hear with him

"The sparrows chirrup on the roof,
The slow clock ticking, and the sound
Which to the wooing wind aloof
The poplar made"

In contrast to the lonely solitude expressed in the above passage we find in Boadicéa, "a magnificent cataract of rhythmical sound." In the last stanza is a forceful striking picture of Roman life as we see

. . . "the Queen Boadicéa, standing loftily
charioted,
Brandishing in her hand a dart and rolling
glances lioness-like,
Yell'd and shriek'd between her daughters
in her fierce volubility.
Till her people all around the royal chariot
agitated,

Madly dash'd the darts together, writhing
 barbarous lineaments,
 Made the noise of frosty woodlands, when
 they shiver in January,
 Roar'd as when the roaring breakers boom
 and blanch on the precipices,
 Yell'd as when the winds of winter tear an
 oak on a promontory.
 So the silent colony hearing her tumultous
 adversaries
 Clash the darts and on the buckler beat
 with rapid unanimous hand,

 Then her pulses at the clamouring of her
 enemy fainted away."

In "Frater Ave" Tennyson has given us "one of the most perfect and purest pieces of vowel music in the language, like a low sweet organ prelude, a snatch of magical sound."^a And in the familiar lines of "Break, break, break" the alliteration is the most noticeable:

"Break, break, break,
 On thy cold gray stones O Sea!
 And I would that my tongue could utter
 The thoughts that arise in me.

^aA. C. Benson—Alfred Tennyson—p. 64.

O well for the fisherman's boy,
That he shouts with his sister at play!
O well for the sailor lad,
That he sings in his boat on the bay!"

And in "The Brook" again do we find the strong appeal of the music of nature to Tennyson:

"I chatter over stony ways,
In little sharps and trebles,
I bubble into eddying bays,
I babble on the pebbles.

.

I chatter, chatter, as I flow
To join the brimming river

.

I murmur under moon and stars
In brambly wildernesses;
I linger by my shingly bars;
I loiter round my cresses;"

Tennyson's idea of the individual apart from society and his communion with and contemplation of Nature are found in the following passages from the "Palace of Art":

"No nightingale delighteth to prolong
Her low preamble all alone.

More than my soul to hear her echo'd song
Throb thro' the ribbed stone;

Singing and murmuring in her feastful
mirth,
Joyful to feel herself alive,
Lord over Nature, Lord of the visible earth,
Lord of the senses five;

Communing with herself; 'all these are mine
And let the world have peace or wars,
'Tis one to me.'

"I take possession of man's mind and deed,
I care not what the sects may brawl,
I sit as God holding to no form or creed,
But contemplating all."

This, I think, may be regarded also as Tennyson's general attitude toward Nature, and his appreciation of the strong appeal to the soul of man through the varied music of Nature. Cheney has written of the poet:^a "melody, marvellous melody, and harmony of utterance; illumination, the last for charm of art, the occasional accent beyond the reach of art—the gifts of voice—all this must be found in a great poet, it is all

^aThe Golden Guess—p. 178.

found in Tennyson."

Sweetness of melody and richness of harmony are the most sensuous of this poet's characteristics. In 1844 Henry wrote of him: "Perhaps the first spell cast by Mr. Tennyson, the master of many spells, he cast upon the ear. His power as a lyrical versifier is remarkable. The measures flow softly or roll nobly to his pen.—He will write you a poem with nothing in it except music, and as if its music were everything, it shall charm your soul. Be this said, not in reproach,—but in honour of him and of the English language, for the learned sweetness of his numbers."^b

Tennyson's sympathetic temperament and his appreciative observation of all that was beautiful and interesting in the world about him made it possible for him to express his thoughts on the wonders and mysteries that continually appear. His poetic instinct and his keen sense of rhythm enabled him to make fine distinctions between sounds such as a "wind with full voice" which "swept bellowing" and the low moaning of the wind; or the happy laughter of a babbling brook and the sullen thunder of a raging sea; or, on the other hand, the sighs of a passing wind and the lark which "becomes a sightless song." These

^bA New Spirit of The Age—p. 12.

sounds of Nature and the sounds of revelry or of happy singing youth were alike musical to the poetic ear of this lyric poet.

From the foregoing facts one may readily see the appeal of the different senses in Tennyson. It has been interesting to note the immediacy and greater material effect of taste and touch,—the unaesthetic senses,—in contrast to the aesthetic and more intellectual senses of sight and sound; while the sense of smell has a peculiar middle ground, and has its aesthetic value also. It is through these aesthetic senses that the poet has gained an appreciation for the scenic beauties of Nature, as well as for melodious sounds whether of water, or songs of birds, or of instruments played by man. He has never been surpassed as a painter of pastoral scenes of Eng-

NOTE: In the actual number of allusions to each sense, I have found that there are in Tennyson's poems approximately only five direct references to the sense of taste as such, although there are innumerable allusions to eating, drinking, banqueting, etc. And the sense of touch is referred to directly only thirty-two times, but indirectly the appeal of this sense is strong in its allusions to the effect of the elements on man's thoughts and feelings,—as the touch of wind or of the spray from breakers dashing against the rocks. Allusions to the other three senses are much more frequent. In one hundred thirty-five of the poems there is a predominance of allusions to sound; in fifty-eight a predominance of allusions to the sense of sight; and in thirty-three a predominance of allusions to the sense of smell.

land. The truth to Nature, which is so characteristic of his work, has scarcely been equalled by other writers. His work has a tone of color and a feeling of warmth, and in his depicting of Nature he has been faithful in his sweetness and freshness. He has adhered to what is true in the scene he portrays—through the means of the emotions relating to the subject in hand. As Holmes said of his contemporary's work, "Jewels five words long, many of them a good deal longer, sparkle in our memory."

All the joys of sense-experience which were so vivid and vital to this poet, were greatly enhanced by his exceptional power of sublimating that experience through the processes of his imagination and through his power to combine poetical music—melodious words—with poetical picture-drawing. Melody is especially characteristic of his work and appeals strongly as we read the poems. His wonderful power of placing before us the pictures of his imagination, and his reflective nature led him to the subject-matter of philosophy of which the aesthetic nature is one of the main sources with its ideals the sublime and the beautiful. This aesthetic mood leads to a recognition of a Supreme Reality—a realization of absolute beauty. Tennyson, I think, hoped by means of his art to help his fellow men, for quoting George Sand, he once

wrote: "L'art pour art est un vain mot; l'art pour le vrai, l'art pour le beau et le bon, voila la religion que je cherche."^a

In this he accomplished his purpose. Tennyson's poetry and the philosophy embodied in it encourage his readers to interpret his ideas from their own point of view and their experience,^b to carry on in their imaginative thoughts the pictures or images which he has drawn—to create for themselves, to visualize, and bring into being long-dormant ideas which have been waiting for some higher power to waken and stimulate them to a supreme purpose.^c Tennyson's power then lies in this ability to stir in his readers thoughts and emotions which might have remained unrealized and which aid in lifting them to a higher plane and a broader understanding of Nature and Man.

Tennyson was continually striving toward a better understanding of life, to overcome the

^aMemoir—v. II—p. 92—note.

^bCarlisle once wrote: "The works of a man, bury them under what guano-mountains . . . you will, do not perish, can not perish. What of Heroism, what of Eternal light was in a Man and in his life, is with very great exactness added to the Eternities; remains forever a new divine portion of the Sum of Things."

^cAs Christopher Morley says, "Books are the depositories of the human spirit, which is the only thing in this world that endures."

doubt which he felt, especially at the death of his friend, Henry Hallam. He has shown by his artistic sense of the melodious and beautiful, and his realization of the divine power or force exerting itself through the wind, rain, sea-breeze, pungent odor of the pines or balsam, his great faith in the Higher Spirit, and his firm belief in a Supreme Reality. He has felt the Hand of God in all about him and in all his work one feels to a great extent the inspiration which he gained through his silent communion with himself in his solitary musings in the forest, beside the stream, or on the beach. His noble character is revealed through the poems, and whatever his own thoughts may have been while writing, he has given us an inspiration which only a poet with his noble and almost divine character could give.

In summing up, then, we may say that Tennyson was

. . . "musical, tremulous, impressional,
Alive to gentle influence
Of earth and air and sky,
And kindred to the spirit touch
Of man's or maiden's eye."

It was these gentle influences which made him a vital expression of the Time Spirit. This

through him was transformed into the Human Spirit which is—in its highest expression—continually seeking that Divine Spirit toward which all our thoughts and hopes trend. It is this Spirit which Tennyson reveals with all the vision of a Seer.

FINIS

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